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THE SIGN BETWEEN DOGMA AND SEA

Sacred Markings in the Devotional Horizon of Salerno (11th-16th Centuries)

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IL SEGNO TRA DOGMA E MARE

Hypotheses, Clues and Limits of a Study on Devotional Marking in Salerno (11th–16th Centuries)

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Thanks are also due to Professor Matteo Crimella: his translation of the Armenian inscription on the Cathedral portal gave shape to an intuition I could never have deciphered alone, and one that had already kindled my curiosity since childhood — when my parents used to take me to the Cathedral.

The notes and surveys described in these pages are the fruit of direct, first-hand documentation — observation and fieldwork rubbings carried out among the stones of the Cathedral and the spaces of the old town. If this book has any worth, it lies in the attempt to look closely at what is too often overlooked, relying on the strength of the written word alone to reconstruct a sign that time has rendered invisible.

Author's Note

This book was born of a question, not a discovery, and makes no apology for that.

My curiosity about an art I love, tattooing, and about my own city, Salerno, led me to wonder whether the extraordinary medical and cultural season Salerno lived through between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries had left behind — beyond its treatises and its buildings — a mark on the very skin of its inhabitants, as happened elsewhere in the Mediterranean, at Loreto and at Jerusalem. I searched for this tradition in the archives. I did not find it. What I found instead was a sophisticated chemical technology that could have made it possible, and a climate of ecclesiastical surveillance in the sixteenth century that could, in theory, have suppressed it — but not a single document that names it explicitly.

This absence changed the nature of the book I had set out to write. Not a catalogue of proofs, but a map of what we know, of what we may reasonably hypothesise, and of what, quite simply, we do not know. The fact that no evidence of this tradition survives in Salerno does not prove it never existed — but neither does it prove the opposite. Holding both statements together, without letting one slide into the other, is the only honest method I have found for writing a book about an absence.

This study does not claim to close the circle, nor to open it with any certainty. It claims only to show its working: every step argued explicitly, every hypothesis flagged as such, every dead end left visible rather than hidden. The demanding reader will find here more open questions than answers — it is the only form of honesty that a hypothesis of this kind can afford.

Introduction

This book does not aim to affirm a historiographical certainty, but to map the material conditions of its possibility.

Historical research — the kind practised in archives, among dusty documents and the silence of stone — is often mistaken for an act of recovering the past. In truth, it is almost always an act of negotiation with what of the past has been lost. In this study I have tried to come to terms with an absence: the trace of a devotional mark on the skin of Salerno's inhabitants between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries.

Direct proof does not exist. The documents are silent. And yet the material conditions, the chemical technology of the Medical School, and the pilgrimage routes sketch out a context in which such a practice would not only have been possible, but perfectly consistent with the spirit of the age.

This text is the account of how a hypothesis is built when certainties are lacking. It is not a catalogue of proofs, but an exercise in intellectual honesty: distinguishing what is given, what is plausible, and what remains, in all honesty, in the domain of the unknown. The rigour of this method is the only defence against the temptation to invent a story to fill the void that history itself has handed down to us.

Methodological Premise

This work operates on three distinct levels, and states them explicitly from the outset. The first level is that of documented certainties: verified historical facts, physically existing primary sources, data that require no inference. The second level is that of reasonable hypotheses: inferences built on the intersection of real data, which prove nothing but constitute the most economical explanation of what we know. The third level is that of declared gaps: what we do not know, what we will probably never know, and which the text flags as such every time, rather than concealing it. The distinction between the three levels is the method. Confusing them is the error this book tries not to commit.

On the first level — the established facts — the book can draw on a solid network of historical data. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Salerno was one of the principal nodes on the pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land. Amalfitan and Salernitan merchants — Amalfi and Salerno formed a single economic, shipbuilding and commercial continuum — were physically present in Jerusalem from at least 1023, when they obtained permission from the Fatimid imam of Egypt to rebuild the city's hospice. It was the Amalfitan patrician Mauro de Comite Maurone who financed the hospital's refoundation, calling in an abbot and monks from his own homeland to run it. The institution that resulted — recognised by Pope Paschal II in a bull of 15 February 1113 — adopted as its emblem the eight-pointed Amalfi cross, still the symbol of the Order today. This means that pilgrims setting out from Salerno, or passing through it on their way to Jerusalem, would have found on arrival an establishment founded by people from their own part of the world. Contact with the practice of Jerusalem tattooing — documented among Eastern Christians as early as the eighth century and codified by the Razzouk family in Jerusalem — is not a vague geographical hypothesis: it is the logical consequence of a historically documented network of relationships. The marks left by pilgrims on the marble of Salerno Cathedral — medieval Armenian and Greek inscriptions on the door jambs — materially confirm this passage. On skin, it left no trace.

On the second level — the reasonable hypotheses — the book builds its central proposal. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Salernitan Medical School possessed the chemical technology, documented in the *Collectio Salernitana*, for producing permanent colourants on organic surfaces: *atramentum*, *vitreolum*, iron-gall preparations used for writing, tanning and dermatological treatments. This technology was compatible with the production of permanent skin marks. It is not proven that it was used for this purpose — but nor can it be ruled out. The iconographic catalogue proposed in the appendix is not a repertoire of tattoos that existed: it is a hypothesis of a repertoire, built on the intersection between the devotional cults documented in Salerno during the period and the visual grammar of the local craftsmen. This grammar can be traced in the capitals of the Cathedral, in episcopal seals, and — in a particularly dense form

— in the frescoes of the hypogeum of San Pietro a Corte. The palatine chapel of Arechis II (758–787), built above a Roman frigidarium and, in the thirteenth century, the site of the Medical School's graduation ceremonies, preserves in its underground chamber a late-twelfth-century pictorial cycle of Byzantine influence: a Madonna Eleusa, Saint James, a procession of hieratic saints on the walls of the rectangular apse. The Medical School and those images occupied the very same building. This is the most concrete point of contact the book can offer between the technology of the mark and the devotional repertoire. Every entry in the catalogue is declared for what it is: a hypothesis of an image, not an artefact.

On the third level — the gaps that must be declared — the case of De Blasio is the most instructive. In 1905, Abele De Blasio recorded rates of devotional tattooing among men in the Beneventano, the Avellinese and the Salernitano oscillating between 0.15% and 0.22%.[1] This figure must be read in context with more care than it has so far received. De Blasio places it immediately after his paragraph on Lauretan tattoos, attributing the regional diffusion to the Knights of Loreto under Sixtus V — but he then immediately broadens his view to sacred tattooing as a universal phenomenon, citing Haiti, Mexico, the Thugs of Hindustan, the Ashanti, Polynesia. This comparative move is not decorative: De Blasio is saying that Loreto channelled, in a modern Christian form, something far older and more widespread. The Lauretan explanation is the most immediate one, not necessarily the deepest. The substratum De Blasio intuits — without naming it explicitly — is a practice of sacred marking that precedes Loreto, of which Loreto is a recent manifestation. Read this way, the figure for the Salernitano is not simply the peripheral offshoot of a seventeenth-century cult: it is the survival, in an area geographically coherent with the medieval Principality, of a devotional disposition of the body that may have roots older than those De Blasio himself set out to investigate. This remains a hypothesis — but it is one the source itself authorises, unlike others. It must be said precisely, however, where De Blasio ends

[1] A. De Blasio, *Il tatuaggio*, Napoli, Premiato Stabilimento Tipografico Cav. G. M. Priore, 1905, p. 154. Lo stesso De Blasio annota che il tatuaggio religioso costituisce a Napoli “la varietà più antica”, deducendolo da un’incisione della metà del XVIII secolo raffigurante un fabbricante di *santilli* operante all’interno di una bottega di barbiere. Il dato è rilevante non come semplice analogia professionale, ma come indicatore di una catena trasmissiva: un artigiano napoletano del Settecento che produce stampini devozionali in una bottega di barbiere ha necessariamente appreso quella tecnica da qualcuno che la praticava prima di lui. Risalire indietro lungo questa catena — bottegaio settecentesco, marcatore cinquecentesco, artigiano medievale — non porta a una prova, ma a una domanda legittima: dove e quando quella catena ha avuto inizio nel Mezzogiorno? De Blasio non se lo chiede. Questo libro sì.